A secret, surreal Korea explored through Nahum Kim’s mixed media magic

There is a lake and seaside pavilion in South Korea where they say you can see the moon five times: in the sky, in the lake, again in the sea, once more reflected in a glass of drink, and lastly in the eyes of a lover.

This place of many moons can be found in Gangneung, a city in the country’s northern Gangwon region. Near Seoul but with an abundance of mountains instead of the capital’s unavoidable skyscrapers, Gangwon’s quiet, natural charm is exemplified by its third-biggest metropolis, an easygoing atmosphere one can find all over the outstanding work of Nahum Kim.

The twenty-something artist has released a book named after his home, a collection of quirkily illustrated posters currently available But while the pieces are in thrall to Gangneung life, the project came after years of inner-city turmoil; five years, in fact.

“I worked for a company in Seoul from 2012 to 2017 and drew pictures at the same time,” writes to me over email. “Seoul was a good city, but it costs a lot to live there, so I lived in a relatively inexpensive semi-basement. It was really similar to the house in *Parasite;* it was really humid and hard to see the sun or sky.

“Then one day I got some depression,” he admits. “My dream was to be an artist, not an office worker, but my life as an artist was not stable. So I quit everything in 2018 and left for Europe. There was no plan.”

Nahum even put art to one side as he travelled Europe, spending most of his time in Berlin. The trip had a remarkable effect on the artist, with his ‘gloomy mind’ beginning to

heal.

“I was greatly comforted by the European people who were closer to nature compared to Seoulites,” he remembers fondly. “Until then, I realised I had been overly concerned about my wallet and had been living in harsh competition with others in Seoul. Flowers, trees, sky, wind: well, I got to know it costs no money to enjoy nature. It’s free! So I was healed and could start painting again.”

With a newfound vitality, the illustrator left Berlin to return to his roots.

“I didn’t want to jump into competition again in Seoul, which was full of PEOPLE,” Nahum capitalises for effect. “As in Europe, all I needed was a laptop and an iPad. While starting my new artistic life in Korea, I felt that I could be happy by living a better life than I did before. So I moved to Gangneung in 2019.

“Gangneung is surrounded by nature that are comparable to Europe: mountains, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Also, there are no tall buildings, so I could see the wide sky freely.

“Even now, Gangneung gives me the freedom of life and

inspiration for creation. It’s a wonderful area where you can see the harmony between Korea’s traditional way of life and nature.”

With his creative fervour renewed, Nahum realised he wanted his digital art to connect with people not just on a virtual level but also a physical one.

“I’ve been able to show my paintings to various people through social over the years. It was a privilege to me as I had no career or network. However, I was weak at communicating with people in ‘reality’.

“I was thirsty for some direction. I drew and uploaded pictures according to my mood on social media, but I felt that

it was just one piece of content and not worth much. So I thought about making a real folio album.”

His first release was ‘, after the naming style of a Korean musicians’s debut release.

“I came up with the idea of releasing each book one by one, like a musician,” as he explains. “I thought that I would like to make a series step-by-step, combining my illustrations with the strange but beautiful. Starting with the *Gangneung* book, my dream is to place my feelings at every spot I travel into one real ‘publication’ every year and let people own it as an artwork.”

With almost 20k followers on Instagram, there’ll be a lot of

people interested in the book, an audience familiar with the *Gangneung* works Nahum has been regularly posting to his profile.

Picture perfect

While familiar with Adobe Creative Cloud staples, Nahum has recently adopted Procreate as his iPad art app of choice, finding it allows his art more diverse expression.

“I use my computer and iPad for my work,” he tells me. “On the other hand, I have no idea about general art tools or materials; I didn’t go to art college as I knew that art was not stable as a career.

“I needed a lot of money to study it. As my family was financially insecure, I gave up studying art and took up cooking, which can be easier for finding a job. But it didn’t suit me and I drifted around for a long time.

“This is my favourite painting as it inspired me to work this way in earnest. It made me start working with a higher quality, compared to my previous graffiti-like level.”
“Then one day in high school I learned that I could draw using a computer graphic tool I’d found by chance. During the day, I worked at a restaurant and in the evening after work, I drew pictures using graphic tools.”

Nahum’s first love though was photography, with the creative spark behind his *Gangneung* poster book coming from some absent-minded doodling done over developed photos.

“I’ve been to various travel spots following my feelings for many years, always with a camera. I was not sure it would be useful, but it was so natural to keep a record of every moment for me,” Nahum explains.

“My photographs naturally piled up, and over a few years became very important material for me. At first, I printed out some photos and drew pictures on them as a hobby; now I’ve come to accept it as a genre.”

It makes for a unique look, drawing the viewer into an undiscovered reality. Through Naum’s lens, Gangneung becomes a part of Korea that’s always there but hidden around a magic corner of the block, like it’s five moon-viewing spot at the Gyeongpodae Pavilion.

“I draw situations and landscapes that I encounter in my daily life,” he feels. “It’s just a passing moment, but if you add a little imagination, it then becomes a whole different world.

“Adults have a kind of childlike misconception when they see these pictures. I think children are artists; we are all born artists but seem to lose that perspective little by little over time.

“I think the reason we laugh at these pictures is because at heart we are still children and artists.”

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